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SUBJECT: BNP'S ZIA COMPLAINS AWAMI LEAGUE NOT PROVIDING
SPACE FOR DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia said the Awami League government continued to prevent the BNP from playing a constructive role in Parliament. The Leader of the Opposition told the Ambassador June 4 the Prime Minister had rebuffed the BNP's suggested topics for debate in the second session of Parliament as well as the BNP's attempts to negotiate additional front row seats on the floor of Parliament. The BNP leader didn't criticize the new government's handling of the economy or its counterterrorism efforts, but she did note the declining law and order situation in Bangladesh. The BNP welcomed President Obama's speech to the Muslim world, saying the party would extend "all support" to the President's goals.

BNP boycotts opening of Parliament

12. (C) BNP Members of Parliament had refused to attend the opening of Parliament's second session earlier on June 4 because the Awami League (AL) refused to accommodate any of the BNP's requests during pre-session negotiations, Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia noted. Not only had the AL refused to give front row seats to two senior BNP leaders elected in recent by-elections, but the Prime Minister had also refused to accept any of the BNP's suggested topics for debate. The Ambassador said the dispute over seats, which erupted during Parliament's first session earlier in the year, appeared petty and was insufficient reason for the BNP to abdicate its role as the opposition party.

13. (C) In her rebuttal, Zia said the BNP's boycott was not merely over seats, but also the result of the Prime Minister's refusal to allow the opposition to shape debate on the floor of Parliament. Zia said the BNP had suggested a variety of topics -- from security to regional transit to prices -- during the traditional pre-session negotiations, but the ruling party had rejected all BNP proposals. If the government continued to reject opposition demands, Zia warned that the BNP would eventually have no recourse but to take to the streets.

14. (C) The Ambassador said a Parliamentary boycott would not be helpful and urged the BNP to take the moral high ground and play a more constructive role. If the government prevented the BNP from contributing to debate in Parliament, he suggested the BNP take the debate to the steps of

Parliament or to the media. Threatening the strikes and large-scale protests that had characterized Bangladesh politics in the last 15 years would be unproductive and have deleterious effects on the country. Zia claimed the BNP wanted to take its place in Parliament as the opposition party but said it was up to the Awami League to create space for the opposition to participate.

AL handles economy, terrorism, but not law and order

¶5. (C) The Ambassador noted Bangladesh's economy was doing relatively well considering the global recession. The recent bumper rice crop, lower commodity prices, a rebound in garment orders and resilience of remittances all meant the nation's economy was holding up. The Ambassador also observed that the Awami League government was actively pursuing its commitment to fight terrorism in Bangladesh.

¶6. (C) Zia and her advisers did not dispute these observations, but instead focused on the law and order situation, noting an upsurge in crime and recent reports of extra-judicial killings and custodial deaths. Zia said the Prime Minister's failure to control the student and labor wings of the Awami League was the root of many of the law and order problems. She noted Bangladesh had not faced such law and order problems when she was Prime Minister. Zia said the BNP would refrain from commenting on recently-submitted reports about the BDR Mutiny investigations until it had an opportunity to examine the reports fully. The Ambassador agreed this was a reasonable response.

DHAKA 00000577 002 OF 002

BNP plans to reorganize

¶7. (C) Begum Zia said the BNP was still considering its reorganization plan following its massive defeat in December elections (which she continued to maintain were rigged, despite widespread evidence they were free and fair). The BNP planned to start re-organizing the party at the grassroots level and then work its way to the top, Zia said. In addition, the BNP would launch a membership drive to attract new blood. Zia said the party's re-organization efforts would conclude with a national party conference by the end of the year.

BNP welcomes President Obama's speech

¶8. (C) Begum Zia and her advisers spoke positively about President Obama's speech to the Muslim world delivered earlier that day. Welcoming the President's remarks, they said the speech represented a sincere effort to reach out and to start a new journey to achieve "peace, security, liberty, human dignity and mutual respect." They appreciated the President's support for Palestine, which was at the heart of a "just and lasting solution" to the problems in the Middle East. Zia said the BNP would extend "all support" to help President Obama achieve his objectives.

Comment

¶9. (C) Zia and the BNP continue to fall back into the petty partisanship that has characterized Bangladesh's democracy since 1991, with the fight over the Parliamentary seating chart as a prime example. Begum Zia has shown she can rise above partisanship, by extending her condolences in person following the recent death of the Prime Minister's husband or by refraining, thus far, from using the investigations into the BDR mutiny as a political stalking horse.

¶10. (C) The BNP's criticism that the Awami League is not giving the opposition space to raise topics for debate is

valid. But rather than taking the high road, and finding ways to constructively criticize the ruling party or taking its topics for debate to the public through the media, the BNP simply falls back on the familiar threat to take to the street. Zia's comments made it clear, however, that she knows she is unlikely to be able to muster support for widespread protests just yet.

¶11. (C) The BNP's internal debate ultimately may be more of an indicator of the health of Bangladesh's democracy than the BNP's current refusal to participate in Parliamentary debate.

By all accounts, BNP hardliners, led by Zia's current deputy, Khandakar Delwar Hossain, are in a struggle with more moderate elements within the BNP, apparently led by former law minister Moudud Ahmed. Both Delwar and Moudud were clearly jockeying for a spot at the table during the Ambassador's June 4 meeting. Tellingly, it wasn't until Delwar inserted himself into the meeting that the conversation devolved into a re-hash of the many offenses of the Awami League dating back to the birth of Bangladesh.

MORIARTY